

Critical Conversations - When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong

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Managing confrontations is a natural part of maturing, surviving, and maintaining sanity. We all learn when to discuss difficult subjects, touchy issues, or embarrassing and problematic concerns. We also learn humor, innuendo, deflection and a host of other techniques to hedge our bets.

The problem in federal service is that we all too often avoid such conversations until it is late. Then what could have been a critical conversation become a catastrophic conversation. Case in point

The poor performance of a subordinate A is tolerated by Manager B because she or she is...a minority, not a minority, older, younger, a person with a disability, or a previous friend [you fill in the blank]. Or it could be that B simply wants to avoid the unpleasantness. But when the final performance report comes out “does not meet expectations”, the proverbial... hits the fan. And we are off to the races, and A is off to final an EEO Complaint.

Now it is true that Tact has been described as knowing of several truths to tell. And those totally lacking in tact may be ostracized or condemned. We all know of career stopping cocktail party conversations and relatives we never invite because...[fill in the blank]. But the bottom line is that performance has to be managed calling attention to substandard behavior so that it can be fixed.

We can condemn federal organizational culture and the Department of State in particular for discouraging honest feedback. After all we are if nothing else Diplomatic. However, the bottom line for leaders and leadership aspirants is that you have to develop our own facility to confront problem subordinates and address difficult topics with clarity and effectiveness. To do so will set you apart in the most positive way compared to our peers.

In the words of Hyman Roth in the film Godfather II, “This is the business we’ve chosen.” And if we are going to do it, learn to do it well.

So we decide to go into the lion's den, finally confront our problem employee of the decade, but keeping it real still goes wrong. Why? It often not from the words we use, but four principles we sometimes fail to employ. Here they are and they are common sense. In fact they are taught in detail at the Center for creative Leadership in Greensboro NC (let me know if you want to know more about CCL).

MOTIVATION - First, be honest with about your own motivation. Talk it over with yourself or a trusted advisor. It needs to be positive in the end. If not, your true intent will show through and diminish the message. "Getting someone told" does not work. Making the workplace safe might. Preventing further damage sounds good. How about self-protection? "I will be derelict if I do not speak on this..."

BEHAVIOR - The feedback must be described in behavioral terms. What was observed, reported? "Robinson, you're a jerk" doesn't work. I just think you're having a bad day.

PROPORTIONAL - It is not enough to describe the behavior; you must speak to the proportion. If it happened only once, then say so. If it is daily, or periodically, then be honest reporting periodicity. In some cases like Sexual Harassment, once is quite enough. Without proportion, however, the listener subliminally discounts that part of the message. If he or she can discount some, then they eventually discount all and further conclude that your motivation was to smear them with rumor and half truth. Note, they may not tell you that, but that is what is internalized!

EFFECT - Finally, the communication is incomplete without describing the effect of the behavior on the workplace, on you, on the group, on the reputation of the office, on something.

With the inclusion of these four principal elements, you have a chance.